

'Please look after the poor wee boy at the back'

Published on www.Telegraph.co.uk
Last Updated: 12:01am GMT 20/11/2006
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Sir Jackie Stewart tells David Leafe why his own miserable schooldays made him determined to help children with dyslexia

Reclining in the comfort of an executive limousine and looking every inch the motor-racing legend and multimillionaire businessman that he is, Sir Jackie Stewart OBE makes a somewhat surprising admission.

"Even if you offered me £20 million right now to recite the whole alphabet, I couldn't do it," he says and sets about proving the point.

"A, B, C..." he intones steadily but soon he starts faltering. "M, N, O... O.... er, no, that's as far as I can go. It all gets muddled from there.

"Incredible isn't it? I can still remember every braking distance and gear change I needed to get around the Nürburgring circuit in Germany – and there were 187 corners when I raced there – but I can't get through my alphabet.

"I can't remember all the words of the Lord's Prayer or the National Anthem either, although I've heard them hundreds of times. I'm always just that millisecond behind everyone else."

For many years Stewart, a three times Formula One racing champion, was too embarrassed to admit these difficulties, even to his closest family. But then, in 1981, he received a telephone call from the headmaster of the private school in Switzerland where his sons, Paul and Mark, then 16 and 13, were boarders.

"He said they weren't keeping up academically," recalls Stewart. "I took them to see a specialist in London and within 20 minutes he had diagnosed them with dyslexia.

"He suggested that I be tested as well and that was it. At the age of 42, I found out that I was dyslexic. Even with all my success over the years, I always assumed that I must be thick because I couldn't read and suddenly I was being told that I wasn't stupid after all. I felt like I had been saved from drowning."

We are chatting during a whistlestop visit to the University of Aberdeen's School of Education where, thanks to Stewart's lobbying, a pioneering project is under way to transform the teaching of children with dyslexia and other learning difficulties.

With £1.4 million funding from the Scottish Executive, it will research new ways of spotting and helping young children with dyslexia, and pass these skills on to both trainee and experienced teachers.

Stewart hopes to encourage similar projects across Britain and one purpose of this trip is to promote the initiative to civil servants from the Department for Education and Skills whom he has invited up especially from London.

"I find it incredible that of the 120 teacher training colleges in England, not one has any real training for early recognition of children with learning disabilities," he says.

"That is wrong. Around 10 per cent of the population are dyslexic and unless the Government does more to address it, we risk consigning that 10 per cent to the bin."

Now 67, he was in danger of ending up on the scrapheap himself when he was growing up near Dumbarton in Scotland after the War, the son of garage owner Bob Stewart and his wife, Jeannie. His parents were baffled by his poor performance at school and he remembers with horror one occasion when, as a little boy, he was asked to read in front of the class.

"All I could see as I looked at the book was a jungle: a whole clutter of words. My teacher, Miss Shaw, was telling me to get on with it but I was blushing and couldn't swallow.

"All around me, the other children were sniggering, or pretending to blow their noses to hide their laughter."

He constantly feigned illness to avoid going to school and failed his 11-plus twice. His friends were the other boys with reading and writing problems.

"When you are being called thick, dumb and stupid, you end up leaning towards others who are like you and so won't humiliate and abuse you. Unfortunately I ended up in a very bad crowd.

"One time I was leaving a billiard hall in a rough part of Dumbarton when I got set on by four or five of this bunch. I ended up with a broken collarbone, three fractured ribs and a broken nose."

The attack left him with the distinctive bump on the bridge of his nose that is still visible today but it proved a pivotal moment in Stewart's life.

"I thought, 'I'm in the wrong place, at the wrong time, with the wrong people.' That was a big wake-up call."

Describing school as "the most painful and humiliating period of my life", he recalls his desperation to leave at the age of 15.

"All those years I felt suffocated and, when I finally got out, I suddenly felt like I could breathe again."

He began training as a mechanic in the garage owned by his father and his hard work on a customer's racing car was rewarded when the owner offered him a chance to compete in it. His racing career gradually took off from there, thanks in part, he believes, to his dyslexia. "When you are dyslexic you have that extra drive to prove yourself."

As his fame and fortune grew over the years, Stewart became adept at hiding the difficulties he had in reading and absorbing information. "When I was doing TV commercials in America, I tape-recorded what I needed to say and played it back to myself over an ear-piece during filming, repeating everything I heard myself say just a fraction of a second later. Dyslexics are very good at swerving around things like that."

During his career, Stewart mourned many friends and colleagues who died in accidents on the racing circuit. Until he came along, risking death was seen as part of the job but he mounted an effective campaign to improve safety in the sport and he's determined to be as successful in conquering dyslexia.

"In racing, everyone accepted danger until it was changed and we now need to do something on a similar scale for dyslexic children, because their lives are being wasted in just the same way as my colleagues were dying unnecessarily.

"I'm just amazed that it has taken this long for someone like me to come along and challenge the system."

During his visit to the University of Aberdeen, Stewart talks to the trainee primary teachers who will be among the first to graduate from the School of Education following the dyslexia initiative. Telling them about his own awful experiences at school, he asks them to bear one thing in mind throughout their teaching careers: "Please look after the poor wee boy at the back."

His empathy with children with dyslexia is further apparent when he later stops off at Kaimhill Primary School on the edge of the city where a unit for children with learning difficulties including dyslexia was set up in 1991.

Earlier this year, some of its pupils wrote to Stewart, who is one of the dyslexic role models featured on their classroom walls, alongside others ranging from Einstein and Picasso to Eddie Izzard and Sir Steve Redgrave.

"When I see what you did, I know that I can do something, too," wrote one of the 10-year-olds.

"I found those letters so touching," says Stewart. "I saw myself in those children."

As he sits at a small table at Kaimhill, surrounded by Damien, Ruth, Shane, Alex, and James, all aged between nine and 11, it's hard to picture him as an unhappy schoolboy.

Perched on a tiny chair, but somehow managing to look as at home as if he is on a racetrack or in the boardroom, he joins the children in various activities designed to make learning to read easier and more fun.

These include using their fingers to write words in shaving foam smeared on the table. As he follows the teacher's instructions, his wife of more than 40 years, Lady Helen Stewart, intervenes.

"It's l-i-g-H-t," she says. "You've missed out the 'h'."

"There you go, another failure..." Stewart begins, but he is interrupted by the headmistress.

"There are no failures in this room, Sir Jackie," she says with a smile. "We only deal with success."

Stewart smiles, too, his fingers still covered in shaving foam. "I should have had a teacher like you years ago," he says.